

When academic papers' stated emails do not match authors' affiliations: A new budding crisis in paper mill-ridden academic publishing?

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Summary

The email that is indicated on an academic paper usually reflects that of the corresponding author (CA). In some cases, there may be more than one CA, and thus emails. It stands to reason that the email, especially if its is an institutional email, should obligatorily match that of the CA's affiliation. This paper debates a phenomenon that has been predominantly observed in Wiley (Hindawi) open access journals, using a small sample (n = 47) mainly associated with special issues with invited guest editors, in which the institutional email address suffix does not match or correspond to the stated affiliation indicated as the CA's affiliation. Many of those papers' authors have a stated Chinese academic affiliation. There is the possibility that these papers are associated with paper mills, i.e., third party paid services providing content, possibly even emails to CAs. An additional phenomenon in these papers pertains to the presence of "loose citations", i.e., citations that are unrelated to the paper's content, suggesting citation abuse. Wiley (Hindawi) has acknowledged the problem and while several thousands of papers seem to be involved, at least 500 will now be retracted.

Keywords: Clarivate Journal Impact Factor (JIF); indexed journals; paper mills; predatory journals; PubMed; status quo.

Introduction: Paper mills are academic publishing's new cancer and threat

Although much has yet to be exposed about the functionality of paper mills, they can broadly be described as third party services that provide paid assistance to either write or collate papers, in part or in whole, but may also provide authorship slots and emails as part of those services (Byrne & Christopher, 2020). In some cases, the paper mill seemingly completes communications with journals to which a paper is submitted on behalf of au-

thors. An increasing amount of vestigial evidence to support the functionality of such paper mills has been made public on blogs¹ and post-publication portals, such as PubPeer². A summary interpretation of some of the trends from those websites are described next. Given that journals' ethics codes are being violated, it can be argued that paper mill-derived papers are affecting the integrity and reliability of the biomedical literature because they are a form of misconduct and fraud. As one example, authors who employ such paper mills falsely claim to have produced research

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1. Two prominent examples: <https://forbetterscience.com/?s=paper+mill>; <https://retractionwatch.com/?s=paper+mill>
2. <https://www.pubpeer.com/>

(and/or academic papers) that in fact have simply been ordered from a paper mill, at a price (Teixeira da Silva, 2021a).

Not only is there a false claim of authorship, this is a case of fake science because the paper mill actually completes the so-called paper's "research". However, because paper mills are not laboratories, the images, data, graphs and other components of a so-called "scientific paper" are likely all fabricated, drawing on manipulated images, templates and image stocks to literally create papers (Christopher, 2021). Thus, the so-called papers that academics are reading and also citing are not real, they are fictional products. Not only, the ability to publish thus lies not in any intellectual ability to conduct original research or to complete original thought processes, but simply to pay money for a pay-on-demand product. By association, journals that are publishing such papers, but that claim to be academic journals, are not only peddling fake science, they are promoting – through publication – fictional science. The risk is not limited to so-called academic journals, preprint servers are also viable targets (Moore, 2020). This explosion in paper mill-derived fake science has also led to an almost exponential explosion in retractions (less than 10 in 2015 and 2016 to over 100 in 2019) (Pérez-Neri et al., 2022), and these are only those cases that have been detected and retracted. The number of fake papers derived from paper mills is potentially in the thousands or tens of thousands. It can be said that science has entered a new era of fake science and a crisis has evolved. Absent criminal investigations that identify the companies that are peddling fake science for a price, because they are de facto criminal gangs (Sabel & Seifert, 2021), and absent severe academic sanctions to those so-called "scientists" or "researchers" who engage in the use of such services, this phenomenon threatens to spread rapidly throughout the literature, by virtue of the inter-citation of papers from different sources.

In fact, alarm bells are already ringing as editors begin to more cautiously screen papers submitted to their journals (Calver, 2021; Clark & Buckmaster, 2021; Seifert, 2021). Others yet are tightening the screening criteria for images, tweaking best practices to note what is acceptable versus what is not

(Hackett & Kelly, 2020). Others yet are creating a virtual moat around their journals in order to literally block unwanted research from getting in (Heck et al., 2021). There is literally a battle taking place against this (and other) form of fraud, and some status quo publishers, such as Wiley and Taylor & Francis, have been particularly hard-hit so far (Else & Van Noorten, 2021; Pérez-Neri et al., 2022). China (and thus Chinese academics) seems to be the main market thus far (Else, 2021), and there are initial signs that China has started to crack down on authors that engage such services (Xiang et al., 2022). However, while individual journals' efforts at keeping paper mill-derived papers out, a larger ill is being ignored, namely that such rejected papers will simply seek entry elsewhere, and with a massive market of journals and publishers (over 28,000 journals in the largest 100 publishers alone) (Nishikawa-Pacher, 2022), there is ample choice of journals just waiting to be defrauded. Not only, with a rise in sophistication of methods to manipulate images, which form a fundamental basis of "evidence" for scientific papers, which are often laden with such images, and the ability to use deep learning methods to create deep fakes (Choudhary et al., 2022), what scientific publishing is currently experiencing might only be the beginning of a rather treacherous path moving forward. How many editors, even those with decades of experience, can with confidence claim to be able to distinguish an authentic from a fake figure (van der Heyden, 2021)?

From what can be observed thus far, the most egregious cases of paper mills that have so far come to light in the public domain appear to have been published in ranked status quo journals, namely those that tend to be highly revered for their bibliometric indicators, such as their Clarivate Journal Impact Factor (JIF), or indexing, such as in PubMed, Scopus or Web of Science (WoS) (COPE & STM, 2022). This is not altogether surprising given how widely such metrics are gamed for personal and professional profit such as citations, recognition, and indexing prowess (Teixeira da Silva, 2021b; Siler & Larivière, 2022). Evidence for this can be drawn by noting that, to date, there are 1735 entries on the Retraction Watch database, mostly retractions and expressions of con-

cern³, with likely many more to arise in coming weeks and months as more paper mill-related papers come to light.

In recent years (roughly 2020-2022), the paper mill market has been increasingly exposed, especially in China where there has been a strong association with hospitals (Zhao et al., 2021). However, as the COPE & STM (2022) report indicates, there are ample businesses across the globe that engage in such services, with the Russian market in particular gaining increasing attention (Albakina, 2022). In papers by scientists – or perhaps more accurately, pseudo-scientists – that pay for third party services (like paper mills) to either write their papers, or contribute to its content heavily, and in countries that then reward such scientists for the journals that they publish in, monetarily or otherwise, it is becoming increasingly common to find academic papers with suspect emails, hijacked emails, or emails with suspiciously unrelated prefixes or addresses, and in an uncomfortable number of cases, empty ORCID accounts that neither confirm nor validate the identity of the author, their affiliation or email (Teixeira da Silva, 2021c).

Methodology

Anonymous and named reports were identified through the DOI of papers listed in Supplementary Table 1 via comments made on PubPeer in August 2022, about emails in papers in which the affiliation of the email suffix did not correspond to the stated affiliation of the corresponding author (CA). Those claims were independently investigated to better appreciate their validity and to try and gather as much background information as possible about those papers' emails. While CAs certainly have the responsibility of ensuring that their contact information is accurate (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2013), and while not all odd-sounding emails might reflect a paper mill-derived paper or an act of academic fraud, editors should, nonetheless, ensure that they examine the email and affiliation during manuscript submission, and attempt to determine the validity of both, as part of

3. <http://retractiondatabase.org/RetractionSearch.aspx> (last accessed: October 23, 2022)

their wider set of responsibilities (Teixeira da Silva & Dobránszki, 2018a), prior to initiating peer review. Editors should no longer take the CA's word for granted, nor should the scientific community or public blindly trust the efficacy of editors' functions simply because a journal claims on its website that it engages in peer review and respects stated principles of integrity and ethics. In other words, even though blind trust prevails, it should not (Teixeira da Silva, 2022a), even more so in this age of rampant academic fraud, including that associated with paper mill-derived research (Rivera and Teixeira da Silva, 2021).

To also appreciate if other aspects related to the papers that could not be gleaned from the papers' PDF files and/or the Wiley (Hindawi) websites, Scopus and WoS Core Collection databases were also consulted on September 4, 2022 (Supplementary Table 1). One objective was to understand the level of intra-publisher self-citation, i.e., the number of papers in a Wiley journal that may have cited these papers in another Wiley journal, because citation rings may be one hallmark of paper mill productions.

Results

In total, 47 cases (Supplementary Table 1) were examined. In each column, identical colors within a column indicate identical data. All 47 papers were published in open access (OA) Wiley (Hindawi) journals, with article processing charges (APCs) ranging between \$US 1450-2550, with APCs⁴ tending to be proportional to the journals' JIFs, which themselves ranged between 1.43 and 3.822 (only two papers were published in *Advances in Multimedia*, which has no JIF, and also no APC). Of note, Wiley purchased Hindawi in January 2021 for just under \$US 300 million⁵, noting that fortified peer review and data integrity were central to the

4. APCs and other journal-related statistics verifiable here: <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/> (last accessed: September 18, 2022)

5. <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/wiley-expands-oa-presence-298m-acquisition-hindawi-1232109> (last accessed: September 18, 2022)

vision of this purchase⁶. Several aspects, including groupings or trends, were observed:

a) all authors are Chinese or have Chinese-sounding names;

b) all affiliations, except for one (#5, in Malaysia), are in mainland China;

c) only one author (Bo Chen) is in common (papers #21, 47);

d) 19 papers have a single author while the rest are multi-authored, with either the same or another affiliation as the CA;

e) only two stated CA affiliations are duplicated; in contrast, seven affiliations associated with emails are duplicated, in two most frequent cases being associated with an email indicated as being Inner Mongolia Normal University (13 cases) and North University of Nationalities (12 cases);

f) except for five emails, which are linked to at least one more paper (on Google Scholar), all remaining 42 emails are associated with only one paper;

g) 11 of the 47 papers have an Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID) for all authors, while the remaining papers only have an ORCID for the CA;

h) except for three ORCID accounts, all other ORCID accounts are indicated as "No public information available", i.e., no indication of employment or other professional background, affiliation, publishing profile, email, etc.

i) 44 of 47 papers are indexed by WoS Core Collection and Scopus, respectively. As of September 4, 2022, these 2021-2022 papers received a total of 21 citations (according to data on both databases). The most cited article (DOI: 10.1155/2021/2453385; reference #8) has so far accrued six citations.

Discussion

In this case study, 47 papers, all in open access journals published by Hindawi, a Wiley brand, were identified at PubPeer as having a stated discrepancy between the CA's affiliation and the affiliation indicated by their email's suffix. Wiley is one of

the most prominent status quo publishers in the academic and scholarly publishing industry, and is also a popular target for paper mill productions (Else & Van Noorten, 2021; Pérez-Neri et al., 2022). Curiously, precisely while this paper was in peer review, an ethical investigation appears to have been conducted by Wiley, which is a COPE member publisher. As a result, over 500 papers are set for retraction⁷, although the web of papers that seem to be involved in this paper mill fiasco may number in the thousands, if not more. The editors and, in cases where papers were published in special issues, the guest editors, need to be held accountable for not detecting this discrepancy in email-related affiliations and authors' stated affiliations. Wiley also needs to determine which email was used to establish an account for paper submission in the online submission system for each journal, and if the metadata corresponds to that indicated in the published papers. Any and all discrepancies should be treated with suspicion. Most importantly, given that these fraudulent activities will impact other academics, either by association with Hindawi or Wiley, or through citation, for example, of these papers, in journals published by other publishers, Wiley has the responsibility of opening up and making public the findings of its ethical and criminal investigation. As it currently stands, even though Wiley seems to be taking action, it is treating this as a private matter of a private for-profit company, but seems to be ignoring that there are also public shareholders who are invested in the company's standing and growth. Curiously shareholder value (year-to-year) has dropped by over 32%.⁸ It is unclear whether the authors and affiliations in these paper mill-derived papers are even valid or if they are fictitious. Since ORCID provides no clarity about the veracity of an author, even though this is

6. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2021/01/11/wiley-acquires-hindawi-interview/> (last accessed: September 18, 2022)

7. <https://retractionwatch.com/2022/09/28/exclusive-hindawi-and-wiley-to-retract-over-500-papers-linked-to-peer-review-rings/> (September 28, 2022; last accessed: October 23, 2022)

8. <https://money.cnn.com/quote/shareholders/shareholders.html?symb=JWA&subView=institutional> (last accessed: October 23, 2022)

supposed to be a core objective of ORCID, it can be argued that as a metadata- and integrity-related tool, it is flawed in such cases (Teixeira da Silva, 2021d, 2022b) because neither the veracity of the author(s), nor their affiliations, can be verified as being accurate using ORCID. What is the value to academics and the publishing industry of an identity verification tool if it is not able to reliably verify identities?

The issue of rewards for producing fake papers, including through paper mills, is a particularly interesting discussion within the philosophy of science (i.e. how is science really made?). While the debate tends to revolve around benefits that authors supposedly claim, as was briefly argued in the introduction, namely publications in reputable, indexed and status quo journals, preferably with a JIF, and then as a follow-on reward, financially by their institutes for publishing in such ranked journals, there is much less debate about the potential complicity of academic institutes and/or publishers in such schemes. In theory, a university or other academic affiliation that appears in an academic paper will benefit from indexing and metrics, such as citations, and in some cases, competition for prestige can be intense, such as in global university rankings (Robinson-Garcia et al., 2019). The theoretical argument can thus be made that universities could promote or support such schemes, and their academics that engage in them, if it brings them benefit, provided that they do not get caught. Such institutes could proverbially look the other way. One way to achieve this complicity, at least in theory, would be to work illicitly through a third party company, or paper mill. The same theoretical principle applies to publishers, in which a hands-off, opaque and responsibility-free approach can be assumed, pushing all liability onto authors' shoulders, even as they reap benefits, including intellect, copyright, papers, citations, metrics like JIF or CiteScore, and profits, either as APCs or subscriptions. Incidentally, for the 47 papers discussed in this case study, Hindawi (i.e., Wiley) would have made – based on stated APCs for the indicated journals – an income of just shy of \$US 100,000, or an average of just over \$US 2,000 per paper. If Wiley is planning to retract 500 or more papers, then the revenue stream from

these fraudulent papers will be equivalent to approximately 1 million \$US. Assuming that none of these papers' APCs will be reimbursed to authors or their institutions, and assuming that the JIF (and other metrics) will not be adjusted downward should any of these papers be retracted (Teixeira da Silva & Dobránszki, 2018b), in such a set of circumstances, can it not be argued that publishers are reaping benefits from fraud and/or erroneous literature (Teixeira da Silva & Vuong, 2021)?

In order to avoid the abuse of APCs by authors, institutions, funders, or publishers, it was previously advocated that any paper that pays an APC to get published needs to openly declare who exactly paid the APC and the value of that APC (Teixeira da Silva, 2020). None of these Wiley (Hindawi) OA journal papers carry such information. Anything less than this minimum information should be considered as publishing opacity, and not within open science principles, which Wiley espoused in its acquisition of the Hindawi brand. One likely reason why this fair and reasonable measure of financial transparency has not been implemented industry-wide, including by for-profit COPE and STM publishers, like Wiley, is because it is an "inconvenient" measure of transparency, as it may shed light on, or draw attention to, their APC-driven business model.

Although this case only focused on 47 papers, the evidence is irrefutable. Given that trust is now lowered or lost for many of these OA journals in the Wiley (Hindawi) fleet, eventually all of their published papers need to be examined to determine if there is a discrepancy between authors' (especially the CA) stated affiliations and the affiliation listed in the emails' suffixes (where institutional emails have been used). There are still many unknowns. It also needs to be determined how these CAs managed to obtain an email from a completely different institution, sometimes physically very distant from their own affiliation. Are these one-use only disposable emails that can be purchased? Do Chinese universities sell emails addresses, or are such emails hijacked? The most common email suffix was @stu.nun.edu.cn, so a future analysis should identify all papers with this email suffix to identify potential paper mill products. Is there a market for disposable affli-

ation-associated emails? Are emails fabricated or hijacked, and if yes, how? This suggests that there may be an element of criminal behavior in such cases, at minimum fraud, and thus publishers need to begin to employ stronger methods of investigation, not merely inquisitive emails from editors to CAs or editors or guest editors, but forensic criminal tools to investigate. Most importantly, they should openly and publicly report whatever they have discovered. ORCID also needs to pull its weight and investigate the IP addresses of account holders, and to assess what emails were used to establish ORCID accounts and if they match those in published papers, or not. ORCID then needs to coordinate with journals, publishers and law-enforcement agencies. There is no public evidence to suggest that such coordination is taking place.

The issue of institutional versus non-institutional emails is also an aspect related to this case study. There are journals that mandate an institutional email for the CA for submission to a journal, but such a mandate may trample upon authors' freedom of choice to use a non-institutional or online email (e.g., Gmail, Yahoo Mail, etc.) (Teixeira da Silva, 2021e). Many academics, even if they have an institutional email, prefer to use a non-institutional email for convenience's sake (Kozak et al., 2015). Although no clear pattern yet exists, generally more papers with a non-institutional email have been retracted relative to papers with an institutional email, with one case in particular (*Tumor Biology*) having a high percentage (>97%) of retracted papers associated with a non-institutional email (Liu and Chen, 2021). *Tumor Biology* is a perfect case study of a journal that has allowed corrupt paper mill-derived papers to flood its gates, without openly and properly addressing academia's and the public's concerns, causing potentially irreversible reputational damage (Teixeira da Silva, 2022c).

As a separate, but bibliometrically important issue, in one reference (#17), the first name of the author "Wenjie" is indexed while the family name is abbreviated as "E.". It is unclear how this culturally embarrassing error, over and above the CA email-related embarrassment, escaped the attention of editors and production managers, as well

as database managers.

Lastly, there has also been systemic failure by the data managers of journals, publishers and indexing agencies. When false, contradictory or erroneous information appears on such databases, then this reduces their reliability and the public's trust in them, whether these be privately owned (e.g., WoS by Clarivate, or Scopus by Reed Elsevier), or publicly owned (e.g., PubMed by NCBI) (Teixeira da Silva, 2022d).

Conclusion

Of all of the different forms of fraud and misconduct plaguing academic publishing, paper mill-derived "research" is becoming a particularly acute problem and has evolved into a new form of pseudoscience (Teixeira da Silva, 2022e). In this paper, as a subset of the wider ill of paper mills, the issue of email addresses by CAs that do not match the stated affiliation is focused using a small sample of 47 papers. Hundreds or thousands of concerns about papers in these and other Wiley (Hindawi) OA journals have appeared at PubPeer in recent weeks/months. Paper mill-tainted status quo publishers need to reflect very carefully on their business models that appear to have made financial gains from the publication of this fraudulent even as they begin to suffer quite irreversible reputational damage.

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Author's contributions

Except for the database searches in WoS and Scopus, the author contributed to all aspects of the paper.

Conflicts of interest

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